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Ecumenical Issues

by Robert Tobias

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CHRISTIAN HOPE AND ECUMENICAL RESPONSIBILITY

By

ROBERT TOBIAS

I

IN EAST EUROPE'S CHURCHES—RENEWED HOPE

A SEGMENT of Christian life and thought conspicuously absent from recent Faith and Order conversations has been that of our Christian brethren in East Europe.

What are some characteristics of their life and hope? In what kind of situation do they live? We know something of their political problems. What of their religious situation?

First, let us see something of the framework in which they live. In East Europe nearly 50 million Christians have disappeared from among the faithful during recent revolutions. Ninety-four thousand chapels or churches, or three out of five, no longer serve the purposes of the Church. Eighty thousand clergy are no longer active ministers of the Gospel in the professional sense. That is two out of three. One hundred twenty-five thousand parish assistants, deaconesses, and others in religious orders, that is, four out of five, had to give up their professional religious activity. Twenty-one thousand, four hundred church schools out of 22,000 no longer serve religious purposes. Something near 14 million acres of land, once the property of the Church, are now in the hands of Government or secular agencies. Less than 100 church publications now try to do the work of some 1,000 prior to the revolution.

How is one to see that picture—a once great cathedral, bombed, gutted by fire, its walls crumbling, the remains taken over by weeds, rats and undisciplined children? Only an empty shell where once a beautiful House of God stood? If that should happen here, would the Church still live? Would we dare speak in terms of a renewal of Christian faith?

Our friends in the East remind us that when the shell was stripped away, when publications, Sunday Schools, lands, power, social institutions, and prestige were gone, they beheld the soul and vitality of a living Church. Behind the crumbling and looted walls of an ancient structure stood a mobile tabernacle—God among men. And our friends in the East are bold to say that the Church was never more alive.

Now what is this Church which has been spoken of as refined? Surely no one would say that all is pure. Some of the dross has been burnt away and with the dross very much gold. Any comprehensive study of the effect of the revolution on the Church in East Europe reveals that there is not one but several forms of church life. Briefly, they have been characterized as, first, the catacomb or underground church which resists activities of a government it regards as the anti-Christ; secondly, a nationalized church, which in general tries to arrive at a *modus vivendi* with the Government and do whatever formal religious tasks it can, the liturgy, the sacraments, burial of the dead; and finally the "refined" or renewed church. Sharp lines of distinction cannot be drawn between these three tendencies; every group may have elements of all three. However, for the sake of this discussion, and at the risk of romanticizing, we shall concern ourselves here particularly with the "refined or re-formed church," its nature, structure and functioning.

The first characteristic of the re-formed group has to do with the Church's attitude toward its revolutionary environment. Many of our Christian friends have accepted the revolution as bearing elements of the judgment of God. They hold that the Church had no business getting so involved in business, in being landlord over such vast holdings. To the peasant the Church had become the tyrant landlord. To politicians it had become a tool to be used for their own strategies. To the scientists the Church represented superstition. To many Christians, formal religious life was simply the socially accepted thing to do, but had little relevance to spiritual realities and the deeper problems of man. The revolution has therefore been accepted by many as judgment. However, they do not regard revolution itself as the judge. God is the judge both of the revolution and of the Church. And the Church must speak for Him both concerning itself and concerning that revolution in which it is embroiled.

A second characteristic has to do with the way the Church regards its calling. Many Christians affirm that the Church still has more opportunities for its work than it is ready to claim. Is this really possible when the Church is so circumscribed? When there are spies in worship services? When the Church has no funds? When there are no publications, no youth organizations, no Sunday schools? Yes, even then, many hold that the Church has no "stand" as measured in this world's terms: it has obedience and responsibility. It does not seek "rights"; it has a message, and that message must be told. The Church therefore has and is an affirmation independent of its social environ-

ment. That affirmation consists of one's inner relationship to his Lord, of a spiritual relationship with other believers, and of a sense of identity, responsibility and forgiveness in relation to the world about him. At this level our Christian friends hold that they must "obey God rather than man." Some of our friends today are rotting in prisons, making this kind of witness.

Beyond these fundamentals our friends hold that the superstructure of the Church in its social-political environment is whatever may be necessary or expedient for the proclamation, the teaching and the demonstration of these fundamental affirmations. In relation to this superstructure they maintain that they must be "subject to the powers that be." If it is possible to have church buildings, very well, they will have them and use them. If, however, it is not possible to build church structures, then they can still make their positive affirmation of faith. One can see, therefore, that there is little concern on the part of this "Church" to be an administrative body nor can it be regarded as a rival political party. But there is a tremendous opportunity for the Church as a Christian faith and a fellowship to manifest the presence of an eternal Lord, of a community which holds all things in common, suffering, joys, needs, resources, responsibility. Little wonder, therefore, that in the Republic of Russia some 75% of the children are still being baptized as Christians, or that Stalin, as reported, should say that religion is like a nail, the harder it is hit the deeper it goes.

The third evident change in the life of the Church has to do with the structure of the Church. Here one can see close parallels to the Apostolic Church. The community of Christians has long since forgotten its preoccupation with the trivia of constitutions, of buildings, of leaking roofs and of property as a major occupation. They have far more important matters. They are not concerned about having any ecclesiastical structure, and yet this kind of structure seems to ensue. There is first of all the simple community of fellow-believers. They gather together for worship, whether it be as a road gang going out for voluntary work under government leadership or whether it be in a private home late some night. In that community they see to the welfare of all members of the community in their sense of mutual identity and involvement. There is a kind of pastoral care by the total community for every single member. The community is itself its own social message. In its very existence it has made a most effective demonstration to its materialistic environment of a new kind of responsible society on spiritual foundations. One has already seen results in the

confounding of magistrates, the redeeming of jailers, and the inspiration of disillusioned materialists.

Another characteristic has to do with the ministry. Clergy and bishops have often had to forego their palaces and now live the simple life of peasants and laborers. In their new state they have a kind of identity which has endeared them to people from whom they were formerly estranged. Many have taken up tasks as roving knifegrinders, harvesters, watch repairmen. Moving from city to city they perform their tasks but at the same time find opportunity to speak of the love of God or to call together little communities of believers. When a famous medical scientist died in Russia some years ago, much to the surprise of his colleagues, he was buried in the full dress of an archbishop of the Orthodox Church. Laymen have become real shepherds of the sheep, counseling, comforting, performing the sacraments, giving religious instruction. One will find small groups of laymen gathered together in factories for Bible study, or farmers coming together for an occasional discussion of religion and their daily problems. They are led by devout laymen—the "elders" of the early Church. It has been said that while there is less preaching, many more are being confronted by the Gospel. Religious education has now become a responsibility of the home in the old Hebrew tradition. The grandfather, the mother, or some elder kin takes the child on his knee and relates the traditions of our forefathers.

These communities do not function in isolation. A friend from one country wrote to me that he had never felt more keenly the sense of being a part of the Church universal than now when there is so little contact.

There has been social revolution; there has been Church reformation. How has this affected individual Christians? Again a whole picture would be a varied one, and much of it would be dark. But without trying to describe every principal attitude, let me share some comments about a few Christians whom I know.

In the first place, they have found a new sense of Christian hope. So long as life could be lived in the framework of a relatively ordered society, many of life's decisions were dictated by fears lest that order be disturbed. The pastor feared to speak frankly on moral issues lest he offend some supporters. The Church feared to criticize its régime lest it lose its lands or other properties. Laymen feared to speak out lest they lose their jobs or supposed freedom.

Then in one sudden coup, much of that framework was swept away. At first everyone assumed that with the loss of ecclesiastical

power, prestige, and institutions, they were losing God Himself. However, when these were gone, and hopes in any human or material utopia vanished, at "rock-bottom" many found a richer and clearer sense of God's Presence, and liberation from their old fears. They were now free to pray, to judge, to counsel, to "prophecy"—hence a boldness approaching fanaticism. As one friend put it, his faith could only be fortified, the only thing yet to be lost was his body. "To live is Christ and to die, gain." Therefore he could speak and he did. There has come to many, then, a sense of liberation, complemented by a new hope. God is present, God is concerned. He has not abandoned them. And people felt that He had called them to share even in His suffering over that society which killed the prophets and stoned those sent to it. God, the Judge; God, the loving Father; God, the Victor of history. The battle for the day might be lost; ultimate triumph was His. How real the psalms came to these people again in their situation.

People feel they are living in the end-time; in the Presence of God time is always ending just as it is always beginning. Life is lived passionately, with a sense of urgency, of self-abandon, of knowing no rest but by the grace of God. Their fellowship then is one of desperation, of hope, and of trust.

So live many of our Christian friends across iron and bamboo curtains. No one can measure all that has been lost, nor the sufferings endured. But few who look will not see the hope and joy which have come to them in a new situation which happened at no request or desire of their own. They believe that it is a judgment, that their society had become so rotten, their Church so far afield from its central task that all that has happened has been to correct and redeem a wayward society and Church.

In many respepcts their past situation is little different from our present situation. Are we not in the same judgment? Will we recognize that judgment as the judgment of the whole Church and the whole of society, appropriating for our own situation their sufferings, their new revelation, and such lessons as ought to be learned for us and our society in another part of the world?

II

In the Post-Communist Era—Some New Problems

The revolution of our era is not simply a Communist phenomenon; nor can it be delimited as any specific act of violence or even a decade of transformation. It is a process which may require centuries to run its course and is bound to involve the whole world. For it is a transition

of civilizations, a total re-ordering of society, of which Communism is only one symptom.

A. *What is the essential nature of the revolution? What is contemporary revolution revolting against?*

The crystalline factor of society. The framework of society throughout man's history has evolved from simplest relations between two individuals through that of family, clan, tribe, feudal state or city, province, nation and continent. Society now seems to confront its possible existence as a global unit. In the transition from the provincial or continental to the world frame the former social structure becomes rigid and resists change, with consequent struggle, revolt and counter-revolt.

Authority. There is a fundamental revolt against the concept of government as the perogative of a self-appointed, God-appointed or any other non-democratically appointed over-lordship. Those ruled have recognized that in the alleged God-appointed governors there has been little of godly quality, that in the noble-appointed governors there has been little nobility. The revolt of the people expresses their preference for a government as the servant of the people appointed by and responsible to them. It is a revolt against the idea that wealth determines right, that success determines truth.

Economic production and distribution. Modern man realizes that in the order of creation there must be some harmonious relationship. Is he to be exploited by matter or is he to exploit matter, or are the two intended to complement and fulfill each other? Several attempts at establishing economic justice are a part of the contemporary revolutionary process: the organization of craft unions, the establishment of cooperatives, the tendency throughout the world toward socialism. Man seeks to find an appropriate meaning and place in his existence for matter.

De-Christianization of an un-Christian society. Western man has recognized that what his society called Christian since Constantine is not Christian, for it has not the attributes of the one called Christ. The rebellion has been a demand for a society in which religion as a matter of conviction is possible, free from coercion and intimidation. Society should therefore provide an atmosphere which is neither pro-religious nor anti-religious, within which Christianity has and may perform its spiritual vocation.

Relation of man to man. Briefly, the history of the human relationship as often pointed out evolves through two stages while struggling for the third. The first is the cannibalistic relationship in which man preserves himself by the destruction of others. The second is a laissez-faire relationship which permits every man to fend for himself—"live and let live." The third, and the only possible relationship in an increasingly crowded world, but which requires a different form of mind and spirit, is that of mutual interdependence. Man rebels against the first two stages but is not yet spiritually equipped for the third.

Any government, any ideology—Communist, Capitalist, Existentialist—any party, group or church which proposes a solution to man's problems without dealing with these problems has no solution: authority, socio-political structure, production and distribution, religion and state, and personal relationships.

What the revolution is toward is not at any one time wholly comprehended by fragments of the whole of society. Hence the historic partial revolutions—the World Federalists, the independent movements of colonial peoples, Nazism, the Hungarian revolution of 1917-1919, the Revolution in Russia before Lenin took over, the American revolution, French Revolution, the Reformation—all have in one way or another sought to correct one or another feature of the social structure in the total striving for a responsible society. Some may claim remarkable achievement. Others have miscarried. But in the total historic process, none can be said to have been without meaning.

B. *What has been the effect of Communism on that process?*

While not unmindful of the creative forces Communism has stimulated in the historic process, one must still conclude that on the whole Communism itself has been worse than a failure. It has set back the revolutionary process, in some instances by hundreds of years.

On the matter of authority, it has itself set a pattern of government by tyranny; it has driven once-mild political powers in other lands to absolutist extremes; and it has provoked the revival of authoritarian Catholicism. Liberal concepts of democratic processes and responsibility, of respect for self and others have all but succumbed before the flood of totalitarianism. People have had to re-learn to genuflect before new lords, to know what occasion demands which prescribed answer.

With regard to economic justice, along with some valuable reforms and scientic achievement, it has replaced feudal landlords with state landlords, and has extended their domain and tyranny; it has demanded production according to ability *and* political status. It has increased man's enslavement to his material environs, rather than liberating him; it has provided little opportunity for vocational self-expression or change.

As to the structure of society, quite the opposite from enhancing the transition from provincialism to world community, Communism has partitioned in new ways with its pan-Slavism, its provocation of nationalism and class hatred, its distortion of serious social tensions as being racially-grounded, its establishment of its own class system fully as rigid, though along different lines, as those of medieval society. Said an East European churchman:

> Our middle class, i.e. leadership, is incapable of thinking democratically, incapable of altruism. That is why our food situation will be so difficult this winter—there is enough for all, but it is impossible to share it equitably. . . . The Communist Party is made up of middle class and for that reason is far from the people.

By its recognition and espousal of "nationalized" churches, and its provocation of anti-Communist states to do likewise (or is it vice-versa?), Communism has perpetuated the fable of the state-church, restricting thereby creative possibilities which might more readily express themselves in a secular state and a living Church.

Finally, Communism has not inspired man to be the responsible social creature it aspired to, but has driven him to the verges of egocentric savagery. In its initial stages the idealism of Communism, its voicing of the fundamental aspirations inherent in historic revolution reached ready ears. People responded, particularly young people, with enthusiasm, devotion and sacrifice. But when no utopias were realized, no responsible social order was established, when people discovered that their noblest intentions were being exploited for the selfish gain of a few, disillusionment set in. People who for years have been fed on a diet of "collectives," "cooperatives," "organized corporate responsibility," who became religiously "communal," now swing to the other extreme and become fanatical anarchists. They react against any and all disciplines, whether of society, government or conscience.

In the years to come, it will be difficult for any body, church or otherwise, appealing for 'community responsibility," "mutual sharing"

and "solidarity," to overcome the suspicions of disillusioned idealists that it is Communism in sheep's clothing.

Communism proclaims its scientific realism, yet it has resulted in the wildest fancies among many of its subjects: people praying for war as a last chance of liberation, or assuming that America might trade Formosa to Red China for the liberation of their own country. And Communists admit that among Communists there is an abundance of superstition and escapism. A leading young Communist in East Europe confessed to me a few years ago that he was a devout believer in astrology, but cautioned that no other Communist must know. And in East and West alike the strategy, "end justifies means," has crept into our moral and religious being.

If in God's design there is a historic process toward a society in which responsible individuals are interdependent, the net result of Communism at many points has been to impede that process.

Again, this is not to say that Communism has not produced many valuable results, or that it alone is responsible for the ensuant evil. Had there been no Communism, there might well have been something by another name, as bad or worse. At its best or its worst, Communism has been a judgment on society. It has pointed to ills which must be healed, aspirations which must have expression, injustices which must be righted.

C. *What is the effect of the revolutionary process on Communism?*

Can Communism last? No. It is already passé. Communism arose as the champion of the rights and aspirations of the oppressed. So long as it was a minority, a persecuted minority, and could maintain its identity with the oppressed, it was in the ascendancy. It was agressive, flexible, positive, evangelistic.

But when Communism came into the majority, that is, when it came into power and was responsible for the conduct of a nation, it had of necessity to shift from an aggressive minority position to the defensive, from a purposeful ideological position to united front politics. It was no longer a crusading ideology, but an institution which must defend its case and its failures. The champion of the oppressed was now the oppressor. At this point the ideology gives way to institutional imperialism and the Communist government is forced to apologize to its people for the sad state of affairs. One only marvels that the Party in Russia could keep its ideological entity as long as it did.

That does not mean Communism has no vitality as an idea in some parts of the world. It has where there are injustices and where Communism is not responsible for those injustices. One has the picture of a fungus which is alive at the periphery where it continues to push out, feeding on virgin matter, but is dead at the center, leaving scars and débris as mementos to its passing.

At the center of the Communist empire there is counter-revolution in that there is constant pressure against the régime. That counter-revolution may at times be bloody, or it may be a quiet, drawn-out process of internal disintegration, but it is there and must be taken account of. Communism, as Paul Anderson has pointed out, intended to create the Communist Society by three stages: revolutionary, socialist and communist. But it has never achieved the last stage. It has not the spiritual quality necessary for the interdependent relationship required for communal society. As a "socialist" state it may procreate itself, or it may stumble toward anarchy or religious community. But not toward communist society. At the moment it appears stagnant. It is not becoming more Communist. A recent document by J. Stalin * is most revealing in this regard. It is an outline of Communist belief and policy with a prophecy concerning the future to guide youth, educators, and Party Members in shaping their policies. The fact that 1,500,000 copies were printed indicates the importance officials placed on it. Its four main points are:

(1) There will be no immediate war because Capitalism knows war would be its end and Communism is inherently peace-loving.

(2) During an *ad interim* period, Communist society can be refined and become economically self-sufficient, thus undermining Capitalism, which depends on world markets for its existence.

(3) Eventually smaller Capitalist satellites will revolt against American exploitation, ending in civil war among Capitalist states and their mutual collapse.

(4) Communist policy is therefore to wait, and let the Capitalist world destroy itself by its own inner contradictions. Only in exceptional cases should local Communist parties overthrow Capitalist governments, and in no case need the U.S.S.R. engage in military adventures.

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* *Christian Century,* October 22, 1952.

Bearing in mind the strains and stresses in the Soviet sphere the document makes interesting reading backward—by substituting Capitalist for Communist and vice-versa, and Soviet for American. Indeed it may thus reveal more of the immediate situation surrounding Stalin when he wrote than a situation an iron curtain and two oceans away. Stalin may have been expressing grave fears of Communist disintegration from lack of any new vitality or solutions.

That is the beginning of an end which may take hundreds of years, but it is the direction. Communism no longer has the initiative. This does not mean the immediate end of the Soviet Empire, which may still be greatly expanded, nor the end of the judgment which the Communist phenomena signalized in regard to Western society. It does mean that the Church must turn itself to different tasks from those confronting it when Communism was on the ascent. And that Western governments have a considerably different rôle to play than they at present seem to recognize.

D. *Some new tasks.*

One evil spirit is evicted from the house and seven others rush in. Such may be the situation in the aftermath of Communism. One could list countless challenges which must be faced: false hopes, moral dualism, cultural decline, a confusion of techniques and motives. But probably one of the most basic will be the challenge of unfulfilled man. Certainly, from all indications presently evident in East Europe, shattered community can result only in fanatic anarchy. In that situation dare the Church not only preach about community but attempt to be community, manifesting communally its responsibilities in relation to economics, politics, mores, and spiritual conduct?

Another challenge will be that of the unfulfilled revolution. How can Christians help set aright and press forward those essential demands which Communism has prostituted? Dare Christians think and talk freely in terms of world community and of united nations? Again in this country these have become unpopular subjects. Will Christians be sufficiently vigilant and courageous to see government re-established as the servant of man? Dare Christians propound the production and distribution of world economies and resources on world terms? If so, what do we say now about the inequities of one part of the world living at a standard ten times above that of the rest of the world? Surely only that Church which senses that society must be judged, refined, and redeemed as a Divine imperative, only that Church more profoundly

comprehending and more actively engaged in fundamental historic revolution than is Communism, only that Church can understand Communism, appraise it, surpass it, and redeem it.

This then is a challenge to an unfulfilled Church—or of judgment on the Church. In parts of the post-Communist world where the Church has been stripped of secular possessions and covetousness, it has been renewed. In its simplicity as a movement and a community, it has a new sense of the Presence, a sense of purpose, of a historic inevitability and of personal urgency. Its destiny is assured, its problem is to be the Church.

Finally, Communism in a historic perspective, apart from the Church, is a tragedy. Man's reaction against Communism, his sense of righteous indignation at political injustice may blind him to deeper evils which brought Communism into being and even to some positive results which have followed. If the Communist era in history is not to be written off *in toto* as a historic tragedy, its lessons unrecorded, its creative contribution lost, then the Church must analyze, interpret and bring the best fruits, the lessons and the judgment of this era to bear in our time and for the future.

These are some of the challenges on the horizon. They are not new but they demand new attention, urgent consideration, concerted and bold action.

III

In the Ecumenical Fellowship—Some Peripheral Tensions

THAT the ecumenical fellowship has become a reality is an established fact. Its opponents bear noisy testimony to its existence; millions of us in several states of need hail its ministry. Its calling, its work, its fundamental problems have been considered. Several key issues—shall the World Council of Churches be a super-Church? shall the ecumenical fellowship be exclusively an Eastern or a Western bloc of churches? shall the World Council be organized on a confessional or geographic basis?—these have been resolved. Here we are concerned with a number of issues within the ecumenical fellowship incidental to but not without effect on central issues.

A. *Should the World Council become a parliament of church administrators or a round-table of prophets? Is it a place for co-ordination or for revelation, for legislation or for renewal?*

The case for the prophets is a strong one: judgment has penetrated our time and demands a fundamental revolution in the life of the

Church and the mind of Christians. The calling and nature of the Church must be re-thought, the structure of the Church overhauled, and the spirit of Christians renewed. This is the day for bold and aggressive experimentation of witness (generally thought of in terms of individual cell or small community units) in industrial or political or economic life, where tensions are most acute. Radical departures from hindering traditions or conventional methods are accepted, if not held at a premium.

The reform movement among laymen in Rumania, the elders who "shepherd the sheep" in East Germany, Dutch politicians who are seeking to re-order their political structure through Biblical renewal, Orthodox Christians who have introduced more new forms of Christian witness in Greece in ten years than their predecessors in the preceding 1,000, the re-thinking and diversification of an evangelism which had crystallized—these and a host of other developments testify to the breathing of a "prophetic" spirit in our time. Conventional shells have been broken; Christian life is undergoing a dramatic transformation and renewal.

More recently there has been a growing sense of institutional responsibility. Churchmen have become concerned to create the machinery requisite to an orderly, consistent and potent manifestation of the impact which the Church could make on a world scale and is not making. There is an increasing concern for solidarity or consistency in Church order, in the sacraments, in general pronouncements, not without aspirations for the Church to take its place, and its executives their places, in the arena of world affairs. And as one scans the world headlines it is evident that the Church is taking a place and its executives respectable places in current world affairs.

Prophets or princes? Who shall lead the ecumenical fellowship? The former tend toward radicalism and unbalanced responsibility; the latter toward conservative consolidation and sterility.

Is it not clear that we must have both prophets and princes? And that one of the richest facts of the ecumenical fellowship is that we can have both? The real danger lies in drawing hard lines between the two, breaking off their followers into separate blocs and thereby losing creative tension and the interplay of ideas. Both then become only a half truth and unreal in our world.

If this danger is to be avoided it becomes evident that churches themselves must bear in their own body this tension between the prophetic and the static, between unorganized experimentation and highly organized institutions. Member churches of the World Council

of Churches must do the pioneering, the advancing, as well as the consolidating. Indeed, it is evident that every Christian lives or ought to live under the tension of a spirit restless with things as they are, while at the same time able to recognize that things are as they are in order to be able to work realistically with them. The vitality of life and of organized church life depends on this tension. It was a near tragedy in the early days of the World Council, for the World Council as well as the churches and individuals concerned, when prophetic spirits who felt rejected or unappreciated in their own communions made the World Council their Church. Disciples know where such a deflection can lead. If the calling of prophets is the business of God, and if organized Church life is to benefit from these called men, then it must hear them. At the same time if conventional Church life is to be renewed it will not be renewed by the establishment of separate "renewal" churches apart from the Church itself.

The World Council then is not simply a parliament of legislators nor is it simply a school of prophets. It is a fellowship of churches with a sense of responsibility both to a realistic world and to an eternal calling.

B. *A second tension is that of American versus Continental thought.*

From the theological sparks we have already seen flying across the Atlantic, one assumes that Evanston should provide a very colorful display of fireworks.

Wherein lies the real issue? Surely a great part of it lies in ignorance. Americans on the whole seem to want to write off all Continentals as being tin images of Karl Barth, or rather of Barthianism. Barthianism is then equated with inactivity, or, as a young man put it to me, the laying of one's mind on a shelf when real problems are to be considered! On the other hand, from the Continental end, Americans are regarded more or less as activists who rush into all kinds of activity without considering either the ends, the motives, or the likely results. Obviously there must be some element of truth in this caricature along with a heavy dose of ignorance or it would not have endured so long. But is the caricature really fair?

In the early days of World War II no statement came out of America which so cogently and so courageously challenged the right and authority of Adolf Hitler as did the Barmen Declaration of the Evangelical Church of Germany. That document was prepared principally by none other than Karl Barth. During a visit to Hungary

under the present régime Karl Barth openly challenged the Communist régime there in many of its attitudes and practices. In East Germany it was Karl Barth who addressed strong letters of protest to the Communist Government concerning its present practices and injustices inflicted on the people. His activities in relation to every issue of vital concern regardless of the nature of the issue or the consequences to him scarcely indicate that Prof. Barth has any lack of social concern or any hesitation in being "active." On the other hand, it was an outstanding American theologian who not too long ago stated that he saw no particular reason to be actively engaged in social problems since the world some day would end in atomic pulverization anyhow and the only kind of salvation would be that of the individual soul. Continental friends hardly recognized that as activism. It is worth noting also that the Faith and Order Commission, whose major concern is theological issues, was initiated at the suggestion of a group of Americans. The Life and Work section which led up to the founding of the Department of Inter-Church Aid and Service to Refugees of the World Council came out of a suggestion of European theologians. The caricature is a bit overdone.

There is a difference between many American and many Continental theologians. But there is also a great difference among American theologians. And I suspect we have more in common with West European theologians than either of us would have as a whole with theologians in East Europe. And such differences as there are, I have found refreshing and stimulating. My real concern is that we find a common language so that we can discuss such differences. One of the basic problems in present conversations that center around eschatology and hope, lies in the language problem. I commend to you, therefore, the study not only of an adequate theological vocabulary in English but of significant documents, particularly controversial ones, in their original languages.

C. *A third alleged tension is that between "Free" Churches and "State" Churches.*

Again here is an issue which needs very careful examination and definition before one takes sides. The old State Church or National Church, as it once existed, is almost passé. On the other hand, the "Free" Churches, or those which we have come to call Free Churches, in their close identification with society, with the mores and aspirations of ethnic groups, have in many ways taken on the characteristics of

former *Volkskirchen*. If, then, a State Church is one identified with a bloc of people, we are likely to find that we can no longer speak of Continental Churches as State Churches and American Churches as Free Churches; there are elements of "State-ism" and of "Free Church-ism" on both sides. The basic problem, therefore, is to ascertain whether the Church's identity with an ethnic group is based on their being a people of God, or on secular concerns held in common by churchmen and citizens of a given nation.

A clearer designation more relevant to the present situation would be to call one concept that of the "gathered" churches, and the other the "birth-right" churches. This could lead to a real encounter at a level germane to the Church's essential calling and nature.

D. *A fourth tension is centuries old, and may be centuries older before it is understood and accepted. It is the tension between East and West.*

The ecumenical fellowship is in more danger of cracking up at this point than at any other. Differences between East and West are not simply from contemporary politics. There is a language difference—one is Cyrillic, the other Latin; there are ethnic differences—one is Anglo-Saxon, the other Slav; there are vocational differences—the East being principally agricultural, the West industrial; and there is the fundamental religious difference—the East being largely Orthodox, the West Roman Catholic or Protestant. Customs are different and now, because of political tensions, every other kind of barrier which over a period of 900 years has not been broken down has grown. At the religious level our Church structures have grown more distant through the centuries. One finds in the East a certain kind of evangelistic fervor which reminds us of the pentecostalist temperament in this country, while they on their side can hardly understand how we can trifle with such insignificant matters as constitutions and program plans.

And yet on both sides there is a real desire to be together in spite of occasional outbursts of misunderstanding or broken confidence. In East and West we sense that our renewal and revelation are bound up together. Their witness may depend on us for free expression, and our expression may depend on them for deepening. Understanding, prayer, study, and patience are certainly required if this tension is to be even lessened, much less resolved in our time. A recent suggestion from an Orthodox Church in East Europe is an encouraging one, namely, that the center of ecumenical conversations in the future ought to be in

Jerusalem. The reasons will be obvious from a political point of view. Jerusalem is more neutral than either Moscow or Rome or Geneva. And from an ecclesiological point of view, Jerusalem is the mother of all the Churches—Orthodox, Protestant or Roman Catholic. There may be a great deal to be said for the practical implications of the suggestion. But of greater value is the concern it reveals on the part of an Orthodox Church behind the iron curtain.

E. *The last tension I will mention, but certainly not the final one in the ecumenical fellowship, is that of the so-called mission versus the ecumenical era.* This is not a basic issue but it might well be whipped into one. Christian mission agencies have generally grown up as independent agencies. They have bound themselves together now in the International Missionary Council. As the geographic areas of mission expansion diminish, and as the Younger Churches take on a degree of maturity and of independence, missionary agencies themselves turn toward other areas for their expression of service. One notes with satisfaction how missionary bodies are developing a sense of responsible world churchmanship.

On the other hand the World Council has from the beginning been a fellowship of organized denominations. Many of these had no mission bodies, some had no sense of a call to mission. In the present world fellowship the churches are developing a new sense of mission as the nature of the Church. Will the Churches' move toward new missions and the mission agencies' move toward churchmanship result in a collision of two great empires? At present it seems unlikely. These two great world bodies have already started working together with a view some day to being the world Church at its world mission. For the two have the same revelation, the same judgment, the same Gospel. They are at present integrating their staff, planning together, trying to serve one another and the whole Church at its whole mission in every possible way.

These are some of the tensions which we confront together in the ecumenical fellowship. They may signal danger ahead at certain points but they are also a symbol that in that fellowship lies a living organism which never intends to resolve all tensions but hopes to confront them in the spirit of Him Who has called the Churches together in this fellowship.

IV.

In the Ecumenical Fellowship—Opportunity and Responsibility

Disciples have a concern for the Unity of the Church. But where shall we take a hold? What sort of "Union" is to be sought?

"In beginning, God. . . ."

This is the starting point of the ecumenical conversation.

God has called us to be one, and has created us to be one. Any other status is unnatural—

> contrary to our created nature,
> a defiance of the calling and love of God,
> a denial of His Lordship.

Any discussion of unity, any plans for union, must begin and end in relation to our created nature and the Design of God.

If one need convincing, let him turn to history, to the tragedies of those who sought unity at another level and on another basis.

Organic Union

Constantine sought organic union, and drove masses of people down into the rivers and seas to be baptized into "one" Church. During the Middle Ages, popes and kings killed hundreds of thousands of people and scattered other dissenters all over the world in their attempts to establish one, uniform, organic Church. In 1698 thousands of Eastern Orthodox Christians were slaughtered in an attempt by the Holy Roman Empire to establish *one* Church in its territories. And in 1948 the process was reversed, again with much blood-letting, when the Uniates in East Europe were forcibly rejoined to Russian Orthodoxy—one, united Church! Today in Colombia, S. A., and in Spain Protestants are severely persecuted—the bishops want organic unity.

Their error is not simply one of method. Method stems from motives. Constantine, the Inquisitors, the Bishop of Colombia, and even John Calvin, could not think of Church unity apart from power, unquestioned authority, or the defense or expansion of empires.

It is even possible that the contemporary Ecumenical Movement will attract to it those who see in it a united Church,

> a super-Church so strong it can whip nations into "peace, plenty and happiness,"
> or a sure-defense against ideologies opposing their own political or economic systems,
> or a possible way for the churches to operate more economical-

ly and efficiently, thus cutting down on costs and enabling us to save pennies to buy more gadgets and faster speeds.

Base motives and methods for organic union have been worse than deplorable. The end result equally so. Out of Constantine has come a millennium of cohabitation between state and church so that neither could perform its proper God-given function. Out of the conformist drive of the Empire came the atomization of the Reformation. Out of the Inquistion came the diaspora - not unity - counter-excesses, hatred, and war.

Cooperation?

Much the same can be said about cooperation.

There are many kinds of cooperation, even among Christians. Above the city of Salonica is an ancient monastery which once was the glory of Salonica. When in the Middle Ages Salonica withstood a siege for several weeks, the invaders promised the monks liberty after the defeat of the city, if they would reveal the source of the city's water supply. The monks cooperated, the invaders cut off the city's water supply and it shortly capitulated. That monastery has been a mark of shame ever since. But it *did* cooperate!

So also did many Christians under Hilter. That is a recent story we need not relate here. And there are "cooperative" endeavors in this country. In one large city there is an inter-denominational committee of ultra-conservative politicians whose express purpose is to ensure that no speaker appear in one of that city's down-town churches without their prior approval! There is another, though very small, international committee of cooperation whose purpose is to undermine the ecumenical work of communions like ours. (I refer to the International Council of Churches of which a Mr. McIntyre is executive.)

There are these, and others, who will cooperate to sabotage, curtail or thwart decent and imperative Christian works. One need not examine their motives to understand them.

In contrast to the cooperation of Judas, however, was that of the eleven Apostles. Against the shadowy picture of the German Christian Church is the clear light of the confessing churchmen - the "Brotherhood" of men who stuck together under their Lord in persecution, starvation and death. Against contemporary cooperators in sabotage must be seen the 100 million Christians who have cooperated to sustain the 200 million victims of war, earthquake, flood and famine these past years.

Essentially the difference is not one of method, but whether mutual self-interest or a mutual relationship in God motivates cooperation. Where God is displaced by politically or selfishly infected ambitions, then every Truth becomes relative, every relationship an opporunity for exploitation, and every strategy unbridled.

I repeat, it cannot be said too often, our *first* concern in the ecumenical conversation is not to eye one another with a view to cooperation, nor to seek shelter in organic unity because of hostile surroundings. God has called us to Him. In Him we find we *are* united. The difficulty is that we have a way of slipping away from Him when we confront one another.

What a piercing confession—this sub-topic for Evanston: "United in Christ; but divided as Churches." It is a haunting echo—"divided as Churches." When we begin to think as churches, and as separate churches, we slip out of His Presence.

> "While there is jealousy and strife among you,
> are you not of the flesh,
> and behaving like ordinary men?" (I Cor. 3:3)

The ecumenical conversation does not begin with churches, nor with unifying institutions: that level of "Church" is too inadequate, that utilitarian motive too deceiving. We begin "in Christ," not as institutions but as individual believers become part of one another in Him. This is the central act of Evanston. Then, in Him, in His Presence, we believe organic unity possible, a common witness to our common faith imperative. This is no escapism or passivism. He *has* united the Church. The question for us is how to get on with manifesting His Church as the One Body of Our Lord.

This touches Disciples at three points; and suggests further responsibilities—

(1) In relation to the essential nature of the Church;
(2) In relation to diversities among Christians;
(3) In relation to our mutual involvement.

A. *Let us consider first the Church in its essential nature* ——:

In Western society one observes a general trend toward the establishment of the Church precisely as an "established" social institution. Loyalty oaths and government privileges, endowments and other forms of secular attachment and power, identification of the Church's destiny with that of Western civilization, and of its purposes with those of anti-

Communism, are indicative of the trend. Disciples, too, are not unafflicted with a growing institutional survivalism.

What is the Church? Not buildings, not organizations and constitutions, not roll books, or agencies, or creeds, or nations. The Church is a movement of people who in obedience and gratitude do the work to which their Lord calls them. To the Apostles it was not the "Church" which came first. That was for the scribes and pharisees. It was His call. Later they discovered they were a fellowship "called together," a Church.

And that fellowship is not introverted; it faces outward. When the Apostles were becoming an in-grown clique around their "pastor," Jesus sent them off two by two with jobs to do. Their work was not themselves. "Not only for them"—our Lord prayed. At Pentecost the Gospel was preached. No one considered what the result might be. No one proposed a strategy to get new members. They simply had to share what God had revealed to them. And several thousand were convinced by it.

What is the Church? It is the community of Christians hearing and manifesting their Lord. Their focus is on that, not on being the proper "Church." They have a job to do, a compelling story to tell, a ministry to perform—let the chips fall where they may. Buildings, church governments, roll books? These are useful tools, but not the message nor the goal. And certainly not cause for division or spiritual timidity. Look at the renewal in East Europe!

Now, in World Council of Churches conversations, Disciples have no reputation as ecclesiologists. Very well. We hold that the Church is a living body with a mission, not a static institution. Or do we? What devours our time and energy? Institutions, *Robert's Rules of Order,* investments, strategies, roll books? Or telling the good news and ministering in God's name? There *is* a tremendous struggle between our will to be secure, to survive, to institutionalize, and our desire to push out, to dare follow Him. Can we as Disciples place spiritual renewal ahead of institutional survival? Have we the courage to sow seed and leave the increase to the Lord? Our tradition does not hinder us.

If God has called us and the whole Church to be the Church, the Shepherd, the Physician, the Fisherman, the Teacher, and He has already penetrated the old institutions with tremendous elements of renewal, then let Disciples join them, that the Church in our time may again be the Church.

B. *We come now to our responsibility in relation to diversities among Christians.*

"In essentials unity, in matters of opinion liberty." This quotation from a German reformer we take seriously, very seriously. We have practically made a creed of it. But does our application of it go far enough?

What are the essentials? Many of us hold that the World Council of Churches' formula, "Christ as God and Savior," is basic. Not all agree even to that. But as soon as we go beyond that, disagreement mounts. Baptists add immersion; Episcopalians add bishops; Orthodox add five more sacraments. What, then, is our common faith?

Or, should we move in the other direction and base it on the things we do hold in common—a least common denominator? By that process, nothing is left: Methodists do not practice immersion; Disciples do not have creeds, Baptists do not have bishops; Quakers do not have sacraments; Unitarians do not have the Christ-God. Our faith, our common faith, is surely greater than our least common denominator. To water all beliefs down to that level is to rule out differences as evil, or in any case not of God, and therefore to rule out all possibility of fresh revelation and insights. For revelation must always present itself as something different. Is it not clear, then, that our differences may be in some respects fully as important as our agreements, or even more so?

It is not enough, therefore, simply to define "essentials" and systematize them—we seek a common faith at a deeper level than present agreement.

I am not so much concerned at this point about *which* dogmas we regard as essential, as how we regard them. Surely as essential as dogma itself is the spirit of our approach to our diversities. This is where Disciples ought to have something significant to say. And no one needs hear it more than Disciples! It is the spirit involved in "in essentials, unity, in opinions, liberty,"—perhaps the step beyond—"in all things, charity."

I submit three points:

1. That differences *in others* may be regarded as "gifts"—as revelation or judgment from God intended to provoke us to mutual exhortation, to further study and common prayer. We ought therefore to seek out such differences for our mutual benefit.

2. That gifts of diversity bestowed *on us* are also intended to be shared. We have a responsibility beyond laissez-faire "liberty" in "mat-

ters of opinion." "Liberty" sounds too disinterested. If we have been given, or have created convictions, we are "stewards" and responsible to share them. Wonderful! Let heretics now hear us! So we are tempted to another extreme. We become so convinced of *our* rightness ("ours," mark you) and enlightening the unenlightened with our special revelation that we forget the *charis* in which the *charismata* may be shared. Humility, our consciousness of the Giver of gifts, our appreciation for the fellow-Christian—these all vanish in our pride—our self-flattery that God has made us the unique recipient of a special gift—and no one else! Such fixations as we do get: a form of government, a mode of dress, a technique of evangelism, a style of architecture, a method of baptism. Idols we make of them! And call ourselves by our idols: Baptists, Methodists, Country Club Church. We become so preoccupied with our little gift that we close our minds—we are too busy—to the vast riches God would pour out on us. Oh, that we could receive His great gift first! Then our little diversities, our *charismata,* we could share joyfully in that *charis,* "Charity." But the text does not say that who was faithful in much, to him shall be given little gifts. Ruling out "diversities" which we can readily recognize as not of God, if Disciples have diversities of gifts from God — whether in judgment or revelation—can we share them in the expanse of His Grace?

3. And the third point in relation to diversities is that the fundamental meaning of every "gift" or symbol or sacrament lies first of all in the relationship between a believer and His Lord—from the sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the last penny the widow drops in the offering plate. What precise content or meaning each experience or tradition or dogma may have is a matter between the believer and His Lord. And where the central relationship and meaning or definition are between the believer and His Lord, no one may make his own experience a test of another's, nor demand conformity. He may share, not force. This fact, Disciples have tried to demonstrate. It is particularly evident in our practice of the Holy Communion: that it is not our table, but the Lord's; that the essential meaning lies in the relation between a believer and his Lord; that we cannot therefore systematize or creedalize it, or demand conformity. This basic fact bears application to every form and every "gift" which divides us. We may enjoin others to hear it; we ought to practice it ourselves. It is a basic for sharing our diversities or God's gifts. Can we? Will we?

I think I am prepared to apply this fundamental principle to my own religious and ecumenical experience.

As to *creeds*:

> In the midst of the materialism, the hatred and disbelief of East Europe I rejoice to affirm and confess with Orthodox brethren there and the Christian Community of the ages: "I *believe* in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and earth. . . ." What a gift the ancient Church has brought to our time! But it is a gift which reflects also the human touch, and one must in all candor add, "but let no man insist upon his definition as a test of fellowship." At that moment it is no longer the powerful affirmation of a living relationship to God.

As to the historic *episcopacy*:

> I rejoice to think of the continuity of the Church since the days of our Lord—in one unbroken line. But the richness of that continuity is surely in its spiritual quality, not its human. It is a gift, but if a gift, surely not a law. And when made into a law, it loses its spiritual vitality.

As to *baptism*:

> I believe in baptism—by immersion, for me. How richly it portrays the Christian's experience and the grace of God. I hope others may find the same richness in it as do I. But if not, am I to say they are not of Christ and we may not stand together before Him and together serve Him? Am I God that I should demand that God and another believer have precisely the same relationship or meaning in baptism as do I? Early in our Disciples movement, it was the time when baptism was administered which first was reconsidered. Our forebears felt that it was the relationship between the believer and his Lord which was of primary importance. Therefore, believer's baptism. A "gift," not a law. A similar re-study is going on today in France, Germany, Switzerland and other countries. The important point for Disciples is to be mindful of the potential Divine-human relationship in baptism as a gift of God, not as a "rite" which has been established by man as a requisite to joining a humanitarian lodge or an Americanized *Volkskirche*.

If our diversities might be regarded as gifts—*charismata*—little gifts, and if the Church is the movement of God's people at a deeper level of faith and obedience, then we have unity. Where we have no unity is where we identify the Church or our central calling with our diversities, often petty diversities, and thereupon regard diversities as evil. The evil is in our vanity, in making of the form of government, or the methods, or the roll books, the Church. We regard toenails as the Body of Christ—as if to deny wholeness of His Body. Thereupon we set up criteria to overcome the "evils" of others' diversity, to get our fellow

conformists to join our particular lodge, and the fight is on. In the process the wholeness of His Body seems sundered, broken. We, not he, are abandoned to ourselves. Look to the spirit in which we approach diversities and to the author of "gifts," first. In the charity of His Presence—

> "Grace is given according to the measure of the gift of Christ. . . and the body is fitly framed and knit together."
> (Eph. 4)

Differences may be gifts, to be shared, that God may more fully reveal Himself to the whole Christian fellowship through each part, and to each part through the whole.

Disciples have an opportunity in relation to the essential nature of the Church; and a responsibility in relation to diversities.

C. *I come now to our responsibility in relation to our mutual involvement as several communions or as many members of one body.*

I prefer to call it "realized identity."

These words from Amsterdam may ring through the century, a hope and a judgment for every hostile and divisive force: "We intend to stay together." We have pledged ourselves to one another. We belong together because God has created us as parts, one of another. We are members of the same body, with a common purpose and life and destiny. What does this mean for Disciples?

It means in the first place that we will rejoice in the togetherness already given. We will accept one another as bearing elements of God's Grace and Truth. We will accept the validity of each other's religious experience, if not the resulting forms for ourselves. We will seek to know God in one another and watch for and herald every new sign of the outpouring of His grace on the *Una Sancta.*

Secondly, acceptance as fellow witnesses of the same God means we will not go in to set up splinter sects where there are churches. Disciples ought to make this very clear—in Germany, in Italy, in Norway. If Christians there are part of us, we, as part of them, are already there. We will rather, therefore, strengthen the wholeness of the Church that is there. This we have done these past years in Greece and Yugoslavia, in France, Finland and Holland through "Week of Compassion." Lutheran, Reformed or Orthodox Churches there are *our* Churches; we are trying, as best we know how, together to be Christ's Body ministering

there. We claim a common destiny, a solidarity of purpose and consistency of witness and an interdependence of resources.

Thirdly, "we intend to stay together" means that every congregation must become the world Church, the present manifestation of the *whole* Church in its situation. The local congregation, indeed every Christian, will want to act at all times as the whole Church, bearing all the rest in mind, being the ambassadors of all in the local situation. Are we representing the whole Church at its best where we are by how we live and what we do? Do our pronouncements on political matters, our action on social problems, our preachments on racial issues reflect the mind of the whole Church? of Christ?

In the fourth place, if we have pledged ourselves to one another, we share a common leadership. At this point, any group which considers unity its business has a particular responsibility to provide ecumenical leadership. Every Disciple pastor ought to be an ecumenical pioneer and servant. He ought to be as familiar with the traditions and theology of other communions as he is with that of Disciples. Disciples seminary students should be getting a thorough orientation about all communions. Disciples laymen and women and youth ought to make it their business to know what is going on among their counterparts of other communions, plan together with them and feel at home among them. Disciples congregations ought to be concerned about the health and welfare of their neighbor-congregations, not competing, but supporting, encouraging, sharing in common and separate endeavors. Disciples, of all people, ought to be involved in local councils of churches, not only through pastoral representation, but in frequent congregational meetings—hearing reports, making decisions, taking action. Many of these things we have begun. A tremendous opportunity lies before us to prepare and share an ecumenical leadership.

Finally, what is to become of "the Disciples" in that spiritual identity which forebodes a realized wholeness of the Church?

In recent years we have grown increasingly conscious of ourselves as a separate entity. We are proud of our heritage. We exhort fellow Disciples to be loyal to "The Brotherhood." We are tempted by ambitions of self-perpetuation, of empire and glory which beset many secular organizations. And yet, at our best, we dare believe that "The Disciples" were brought into being in some sense to disappear, that we were called to state a truth and then to be lost in the larger body and the fuller truth which might ensue. That truth has been stated, larger unity is being manifest. Are we ready now not to seek our own life, a proud

name for ourselves, but to lose it, to see our self-consciousness as "The Disciples" overwhelmed in a larger consciousness of the whole Church, to look to Him Who first called men to be His disciples to use us as a part of His whole Body?

Where should Disciples take hold in their concern for unity? Surely we must first beseech Him to take hold of us!